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ABSTRACT

Whole language content lessons are recommended as a means for teachers of English as a second language to help their students develop both communicative and academic competence. Whole language is an approach to teaching that relies on the principles that lessons should: (1) progress from whole to part, (2) be learner-centered, (3) have meaning and purpose, (4) promote social interaction, (5) include all four communication modes (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and (6) reflect the teacher's faith in the learners. Each of the principles is explained, a content lesson based on these principles is described, and a checklist for evaluating the degree to which any lesson is consistent with whole language principles is offered. (Author/MSE)

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Abstract for Whole Language Content Lessons for ESL Students

David and Yvonne Freeman

Teachers of ESL students find that by using whole language content lessons they are able to develop both communicative and academic competence in their students. Whole language is an approach to teaching which relies on certain principles: (1) lessons should progress from whole to part, (2) lessons should be learner-centered, (3) lessons should have meaning and purpose, (4) lessons should promote social interaction, (5) lessons should include all 4 modes, and (6) lessons should reflect the teacher's faith in the learners. This article explains each of these principles, describes a content lesson based on the principles, and offers a checklist teachers can use to evaluate the degree to which any content lesson is consistent with whole language principles.

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WHOLE LANGUAGE CONTENT LESSONS FOR ESL STUDENTS

David and Yvonne Freeman

The challenge for ESL teachers in public schools is to prepare their students to compete academically with native speakers of English. As a result, the focus of many ESL classes has shifted from developing communicative competence to developing academic competence. ESL teachers are now being asked to teach both language and content. One approach a number of teachers is finding helpful is to use whole language content lessons. We will briefly define whole language, describe a sample whole language content lesson, and then show how the lesson could be evaluated by using a whole language checklist.

Whole language is what Anthony (1963) would term an approach to teaching rather than a method. Certain principles of teaching and learning underlie the whole language approach, and whole language teachers believe that learning is easier when these principles are followed:

(1) **Lessons should progress from whole to part** - The focus is on understanding concepts rather than memorizing facts and details. Children read and write whole articles and stories rather than filling out worksheets and completing exercises that emphasize specific parts of language in isolation.

(2) **Lessons should be learner centered** - Teachers in whole language classes become "kid watchers" (Y. Goodman, 1978). They build on student strengths, background knowledge and interests rather than drilling students on areas of deficit.

(3) **Lessons should have meaning and purpose** - Frank Smith (1985) says that something is meaningful if children can bring meaning to it.

Children need to see a purpose in their activities, and it must be their purpose, not just the teacher's.

(4) **Lessons should promote social interaction** - Kagan (1986) and others have shown the cognitive and social benefits of having students work cooperatively. Vygotsky (1978) argues that all learning takes place in social interaction. Wells (1986) has shown the importance of social interaction for school success.

(5) **Lessons should include all 4 modes** - At one time ESL students were not encouraged to read and write until their oral language was fully developed. Recent research (Rigg & Enright, 1986) has shown that ESL students can read and write from the start. This is particularly important for the development of academic competence.

(6) **Lessons should reflect the teacher's faith in the learners** - ESL teachers have to have high expectations for all their students and must communicate those expectations to them. Students respond to teachers who believe in their potential.

What do these principles look like in action in a content based lesson? We'd like to describe a lesson we have taught to elementary students. The format can be adapted to fit other subject areas and grade levels. This specific lesson, which can also be tailored to meet district competency requirements for science, is only an example of the kinds of creative lessons teachers following whole language principles can develop. We have found that this particular lesson is effective for introducing a thematic unit on animals.

WHOLE LANGUAGE CONTENT ANIMAL LESSON

1. Put up a large picture of a fawn lying in a meadow.
2. Ask students to do a "quick write" describing the animal they see. Teacher also writes. (In a "quick write" we give students one minute to write down any words, phrases, or sentences that come to mind. The listing is for their purposes only and is not collected or corrected.)
3. Students share their "quick write" idea with a partner. (This allows students to share ideas and helps quieter students feel more comfortable about sharing in the large group later.)
4. In a brainstorming session, the teacher asks students to volunteer to share what they have written and shared. The teacher write ideas on butcher paper, an overhead transparency, or the blackboard.
5. Students are next asked if any of the words or phrases go together in any way. As students begin to categorize the list, the teacher records what the students say should go together by using different symbols. Not all words may fit neatly into a category. A sample of a typical list demonstrates this step.

peaceful	fawn
young	grass
large eyes	calm
soft fur	yellow flowers
spotted	pointed ears
4 legs	Bambi

6. Next put up a large picture of a kangaroo with baby in pouch.

7. Ask the students how the two pictures are the same/different with the vocabulary and the categories already discussed. (For example, both pictures have baby animals. While both the fawn and kangaroo have fur, the fur is different. The animals move differently - 2 legs vs. 4)

8. Each student or pairs of students are given a picture of an animal. Students then are asked to find students with pictures of animals that reflect the categories we have discussed such as outer covering, habitat, how the animals move. (Give students some choice with their picture. If students do not like the animal picture they have, let them change it.)

9. Students are allowed to move freely around the room, talking with other students about their pictures, and forming groups.

10. After groups are formed, have the students in each group hold up their pictures, and the rest of the class helps decide if all of them belong together. (These discussions usually bring up questions for further research.)

11. Students then sit down and form groups of three or four. Each is given a copy of a Zoo Books magazine. Zoo Books is a publication out of the San Diego Zoo that features different animals or animal species. Again, students came have some choice in choosing a magazine that interests members of the group. (For other topics, other types of high-interest reading material could be used including World magazine for science and social studies, Penny Power for math and economics or Cobblestone for social studies and history.)

12. Students are asked to find some interesting facts in the magazine about the animals featured that they believe others may not know and pose it as a question. (We have had questions such as "How many hours does a panda eat

each day?" "Are zebras black with white stripes or white with black stripes?" "Which shark is the most dangerous to man?")

This activity often gives students a starting point for some research on particular animals. Or they might move to broader themes such as the relationship of animals to man. In other words, this "lesson", which might stretch over several days, is really just a beginning for a larger unit.

This animal lesson provides ESL teachers many chances to involve students in meaningful content. It is also an attempt to put the principles of Whole Language listed above into practice. One of the ways we have worked with teachers to help them evaluate their lessons from a whole language perspective is to have them check their lessons with the WHOLE LANGUAGE CHECKLIST.

WHOLE LANGUAGE CHECKLIST

(1) Does the lesson move from the general to the specific? Are details presented within a general conceptual framework?

(2) Is there an attempt to draw on student background knowledge and interests? Are students given choices?

(3) Is the content meaningful? Does it serve a purpose for the learners?

(4) Do students work together cooperatively? Do students interact with one another or do they only react to the teacher?

(5) Do students have an opportunity to read and write as well as speak and listen during the lesson?

(6) Does the teacher demonstrate a belief that students will be successful learners?

In the whole language content lesson on animals, we attempted to help students bring what they knew about some animals in general to help them see how different details about the animals could then be applied to

other animals. Rather than giving students details and lists of vocabulary to learn, students generated their own vocabulary and taught each other as they interacted with one another. Since choice and students' own background knowledge was brought into the lessons, success was guaranteed for all the students.

No one has devised the perfect lesson plan. Any lesson can flop on a certain day with a particular group of learners. However, we believe that teachers who present lessons which offer significant content and follow the Whole Language Checklist will be able to improve the academic competence of their ESL students in ways that are meaningful and purposeful for the learners.

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